Russian Short Stories

The Old City Of Marseilles

Alexander Kuprin

The Old City Of Marseilles by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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I

At the time that the new city, together with its splendid street of Cannobierre, is, about eleven o'clock at night, plunging into deep, bourgeois slumber—at that time the old city comes to life.

The old city is a capricious, odd network of crooked, narrow little streets, through which it would be impossible even for a one horse cab to drive. What inconceivable stench, filth and darkness reign in this involved cloaka! All sorts of domestic refuse, swill, greens, oyster-shells—everything is dumped on the street, or simply thrown out of the window. And it is not at all a rare sight to see in the street some swarthy lad or girl of six or seven paying the debt to nature in one of those poses that Teniers, Van Braouveur, and Teniers the Younger (Teneers) used to depict with such naive art on their canvases. There are in the old city such bylanes, narrow, dark even in the daytime, that one has to run through them, stopping one's nose with the fingers and holding the breath.

And so, when night comes on, the old city comes to life. Nearer

the central streets it is still somewhat respectable; but, as the port draws nearer, as the streets sink down—the old city becomes gayer and more unrestrained. To the right and left there is nothing but little taverns, gayly illuminated from within. There are sounds of music from everywhere. Sailors and cabin-boys, in fives and sixes, walk along the streets, holding one another around waists and necks—French, Italian, Greek, English, Russian. … The bars are crowded to overflowing. … Tobacco smoke; absinthe; and cursing in all the tongues of the terrestrial globe. …

Of course, both Baedekers and people in the know will warn you that it is dangerous to go into the port even in the daytime. For that reason, quite naturally, we set out for it at night; and once more, for the hundreth time, I reiterate that all Baedekers lie; and that the most charming, peaceful and simple of folks are sailors, a trifle under the weather. We enter a low-ceiled, stuffy tavern and modestly ask for some lemonade and ice—the nights are sultry now, and we are afflicted by thirst, and there is no better remedy in the world for quenching it. Immediately two crudely daubed young damsels sit down near me and my comrade, and, under the table, each lays her leg upon that of her neighbor. This is a special coquetry of the sea. They demand various drinks from us. We willingly submit—for, surely, the *bon ton* of the place must be sustained. A quarter of an hour elapses. Our ladies perceive that we do not at all belong to that tribe of people who are buffeted for two or three months at a time in the midst of the stormy sea, without seeing a single woman during all that time. They beg for pin-money.

Five francs not only pacify them, but even enrapture them, and they trustingly tell us of certain secret phases of their life. From boatswains and captains, especially those who are rather elderly, they take two or three francs; from sailors, a franc—and sometimes even fifty centimes. Right above, over the bar, there are several labyrinthine corridors, with stall-like rooms to the right and left. A momentary love or its simulacrum—and man and woman have gone their different directions. Is it much a sailor wants?

"But there's one bad thing about it, monsieur," says the lanky Henrietta gravely, "sometimes they drink too much whisky-and-soda, and then they start in to fight. That's very unpleasant, dangerous, and troublesome for us. And it's nothing else but whisky-and-soda that knocks them off their feet or drives them crazy. However, absinthe will also turn the trick."

II

That day, no matter how we tried, we were not able to find the way back to our hotel, The Port. We were as confused as blind puppies near the grandiose, silent Veauban fortifications; and for ten times or so, after having gone around in a circle, we returned to the same spot. Finally we chanced to meet a knot of intoxicated sailors. We politely asked them for directions, and immediately all of them—some ten or fifteen—painstakingly and obligingly escorted us to our very house.

I also recall another night. We were sitting in a Spanish bar, situated on one of the innumerable streets of the port—among which streets, by the way, I could never orientate myself. A

party of Englishmen had planted themselves solidly alongside of us—probably they belonged to the aristocracy of ships: skippers, machinists, or boatswains—or something of that sort. They were all well-grown, austere, stalwart men, with sunburnt, weather beaten, rough-skinned faces. One of them, a clean-shaven chap, with a head as bare as a billiard ball, lit a pipe. I recognized my favorite Maryland tobacco by the smell, and, lifting my hat slightly and turning toward the billiard ball, I asked:

"*Old Judge*, sir?"

"Oh, yes, sir," and, good-naturedly, having dried the mouthpiece by means of pressing his elbow hard against his side, he extended the pipe to me:

"Please, sir."

Fortunately, I still had some Russian cigarettes (and they can be truly appreciated only in France, where everybody smokes the most execrable tobacco of the government monopoly), and I offered him my case. Five minutes later we were already squeezing one another's hands, so that my bones cracked, and we were yelling all over the old city:

"Rule, Britannia, Britannia rules the waves!"

There was still another incident which, to this day, I recall with deep, joyous tenderness.

This happened when the night was on the wane—about three or four o'clock, say. It was the peak of things, so to speak, in the little tavern. The waiters could barely manage to place on the little tables the most diversified "swell" drinks of all

imaginable colors: glaucous, brown, light blue, and others. Barely visible through the dense tobacco smoke were the dark contours of the people, that walked just as though they were figures in a nightmare, that, just like drowned men under water, moved, swayed, and embraced one another.

And at this juncture an exceedingly queer fellow walked in through the wide-open doors. He was already old, about fifty or sixty, small of stature, and spare. His thick gray hair falls over his shoulders and back like a superb, beautiful mane. He has a lofty, broad brow, strong and splendid in structure; heavy, overhanging eyelids; puckered eyes; and dark pouches under the eyes. The color of the face is dark, earthy, unhealthy. He has a multitude of wrinkles, ashen gray mustaches and beard. In his hands he carries an odd musical instrument. It consists of an ordinary cigar box, upon which are still preserved the black, oval trademarks, “Colorado.” A round opening has been sawn in the lid. A small, narrow board, crudely glued on to the box, serves as its neck. There are homemade keys and six fine strings.

This man does not exchange greetings with anyone, and does not even seem to see anybody. He calmly squats down near the counter; then he lies down along its length, upon the bare floor, face upward. For a few seconds he tunes his amazing instrument, then loudly calls out, in the jargon of the south, the name of some popular national song, and, still lying down, commences to play.

I am very fond of the guitar—that tender, chanting, expressive instrument, and I have frequent occasion to hear artists who

have the mastery of virtuosos on this instrument—up to celebrities, known to all Russia. But still, up to this incident, I could never imagine that a piece of wood with strings and ten human digits could create such full and harmonious singing music. The cigar box of this curious old man sang with silvern sounds, just like a distant, splendid choir, composed of children, women, or angels.

The noisy bar immediately became quiet. Pipes and cigars were put away somewhere or other. The sailors forgot about their beer mugs, and it seemed to me that this somber drinking place somehow grew brighter and cleaner. The women first, and then all the other visitors after them, got up from their places and surrounded the recumbent old man. From a neighboring dive came the sounds of a concertina harmonica. Someone tiptoed up to the door and closed it without a sound.

The old man concluded one song, and at once called out the name of another, and again commenced playing, directing his puckered eyes toward the ceiling. Thus, amidst the general, reverential silence—yes, now it will be appropriate to use the word—he played several popular songs through, now slow and passionate, then playfully and slyly provoking, in which one could involuntarily sense an ancient Arabian intricacy, sensuously passionate, indolently languishing. Having played the basal motif, he would begin to vary it, and I will scarcely be mistaken in saying that these variations entered his head but now, even as he lay on the spittle-covered floor and improvised.

Finally he said, in the purest of French:

“Now I shall play for you a waltz by Chopin. *Valse Brillante*,” he added, in explanation.

Who does not know this waltz, always difficult in technique, as it is executed on the forte piano? And I, with joy and amazement, not only heard, but, so it seems to me, saw, how from the strings stretched over the cigar box there suddenly poured shimmering stones of great value—playing, sparkling, kindling with deep varicolored fires. A god was juggling diamonds.

Having finished, the old man took the instrument in his right hand, and stretched his left upward. At first his intention was not comprehended, and, with a certain insistence he repeated his gesture. K., my fellow traveler, was the first to surmise what the matter was, and took the old man by the hand, helping him to get up. At once scores of hands caught up the old man respectfully and cautiously, and put him on his feet. For a few moments the crowd hid him completely from my view, and it was then that I made a faux pas, at the recollection of which I blush even now, as I dictate these lines. I had not noticed that many of the auditors were extending money to the old man, and that he was courteously and firmly declining these profferings. With a heart moved to tenderness, with a gaucherie common to all people under such circumstances, I squeezed my way through to the old man and extended to him a handful of silver. But probably my humble gift, made with all the sincerity of my soul, was just the very drop that makes the goblet overflow. The old man looked at me, puckering his eyes contemptuously—he had splendid, dark, profound eyes—and

said dryly, clipping off each word distinctly:

“I did not play for you, nor for them,” and he made a sweeping gesture that took in all the spectators. “But, had you in reality listened to me attentively, and if you do understand anything at all of music—you must be aware that this is such a rare occasion that it is not you that have to thank me, but I that have to thank you,” and, having plunged his hand into a pocket of the widest of trousers, he drew thence a whole heap of copper coins, and majestically gave them to me.

Completely at a loss, confused, I began to mumble incoherent apologies:

“I am dreadfully ashamed, maître, over my action … I am in despair … You will confer a great honor upon me and will quiet my conscience if you will consent to sit down at our table and will take a swallow of some wine or other …”

The old man was a trifle mollified, and almost smiled, but never the less he declined the invitation.

“I neither drink nor smoke. And I wouldn’t advise you to. Landlord! I’ll have a glass of cold water, please.”

Probably never during his entire checquered life had the landlord—stocky giant, all grown over with hair, with a bared neck like a bull’s—poured out wine for anybody with that profound and attentive respect with which he filled a glass of water for the musician. The old man drank off the water, carelessly thanked the landlord, made a farewell sign with his hand to all of us, and walked out into the darkness of the night. Subsequently, I made a round of all the taverns, bars,

and dram-shops of the old city, in the hope of running across a trace of my mysterious musician. But he had concealed himself somewhere, had vanished, just like water that hath flowed away, just like a cloud that has raced by and melted away, just like a magic dream. But one thing consoles me, when ever my recollections turn upon this astonishing man: never an American millionaire; never an Englishman, in the special costume of a tourist, with a pith helmet on his head, with a Baedeker under his armpit, a Kodak in one hand, an alpenstock in the other, and binoculars slung over his shoulder; never a prince of the blood, traveling incognito, never shall any one of them see and never shall any one of them hear anything of the sort. And this thought, willy nilly, gladdens me.